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When Taking a Chance Pays Off

Our practice has many talented employees, and we value every one of them. But we have one employee, Christy, who is especially beloved. Even though she works in patient services, our medical department managers insisted on throwing a birthday party for her in addition to the one her own department had planned. Technicians decorated her locker and physicians brought her cards. Christy's birthday was a joyful day for our staff. She is a treasured coworker.

We didn't plan to hire an individual with Down syndrome, but when Christy applied for an open position in our practice, she arrived at the interview with a representative from an organization that helps adults with disabilities find jobs. When Katie, our support services manager, interviewed her, Christy explained that she'd always wanted to work in health care. Katie described her as "enthusiastic, happy, outgoing, and nice"—and, she thought, "I have to find a place for this person." She adapted the position to create a role for Christy.

Katie designed a color-coded system for Christy's daily tasks. Christy has her own supply closet and a laminated card that she keeps in her pocket. The first item on the list has an orange square next to it and states, "Get paper towels, coffee cups, utensils, regular coffee, decaf coffee, and filters for upstairs," and there is an orange tag next to the coffee supplies. Christy has 10 tasks on her list. She often notices things that need to be done and proposes projects. She clocks in and out and uses our employee software system.

Christy's parents report that she gets up early every workday morning to pack her backpack and prepare breakfast. She leaves at precisely 7:45 a.m. and walks to work. Her mom says that "Christy takes her job very seriously and loves it!" She also says that "having a job creates independence for our daughter, and it is such a blessing to our family."

But this job isn't just good for Christy and her family; it's valuable for our practice, too. Ophthalmologists know that workforce diversity increases productivity, creative problem-solving, and employee satisfaction. While hiring an individual with Down syndrome isn't an obvious step in creating a diverse workplace, the benefits of having Christy in our practice illustrate a few principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

Christy's daily presence reminds our employees and patients that we value and respect everyone. She is treated as a peer and with great kindness by her coworkers, which spills over to kindness for other coworkers. And her presence is culture-building because it communicates our values more effectively than any written document on DEI (which is also important). When patients see Christy, it lets them know that we care about patients with disabilities and treat them equitably.

In a relevant report, McKinsey & Company states that "People with Down syndrome generally have a positive impact on organizational health dimensions such as leadership, external orientation, culture and climate, motivation, and coordination and control. This impact has been measured in qualitative and quantitative surveys of leading organizations that have chosen to hire people with Down syndrome."¹ The physicians, technicians, managers, and even the patients of our practice would agree.

The McKinsey report suggests that it is more challenging to include people who have an intellectual disability than those who have physical or sensory disabilities, and that organizations need an "existing cultural element or mechanism for cultural transformation" to overcome such challenges. Katie found that she had to make some adjustments to Christy's job description—but in truth, this can be necessary for other employees as well.

Christy's mom says, "I'm so glad that this ophthalmology group took a chance on hiring my daughter. It shows Christy that she has value and purpose." We're glad that Christy took a chance on us, too.



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1 Assis V et al. The value that employees with Down syndrome can add to organizations. March 1, 2014. www.mckinsey.com. Accessed Feb. 3, 2023.